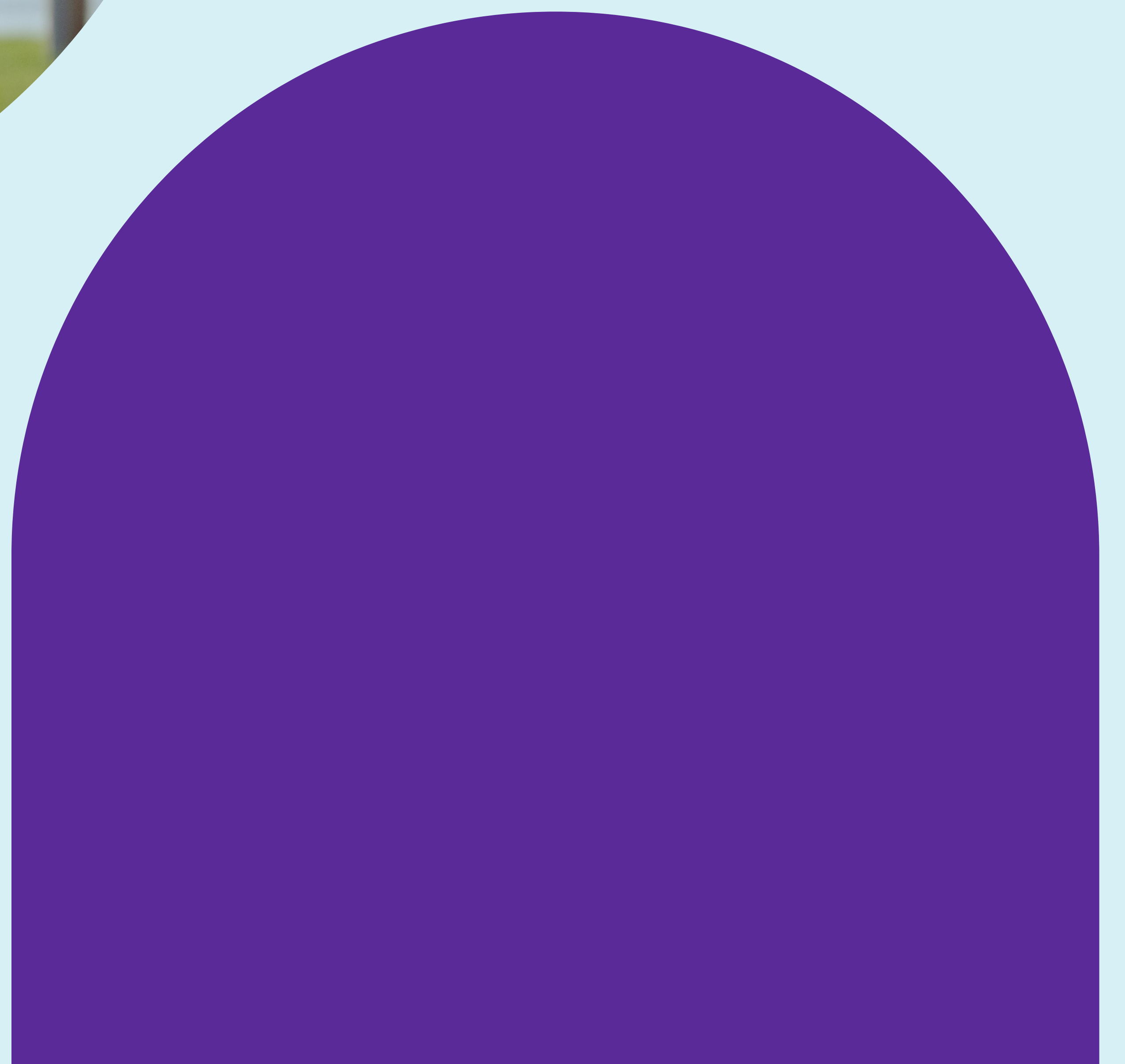
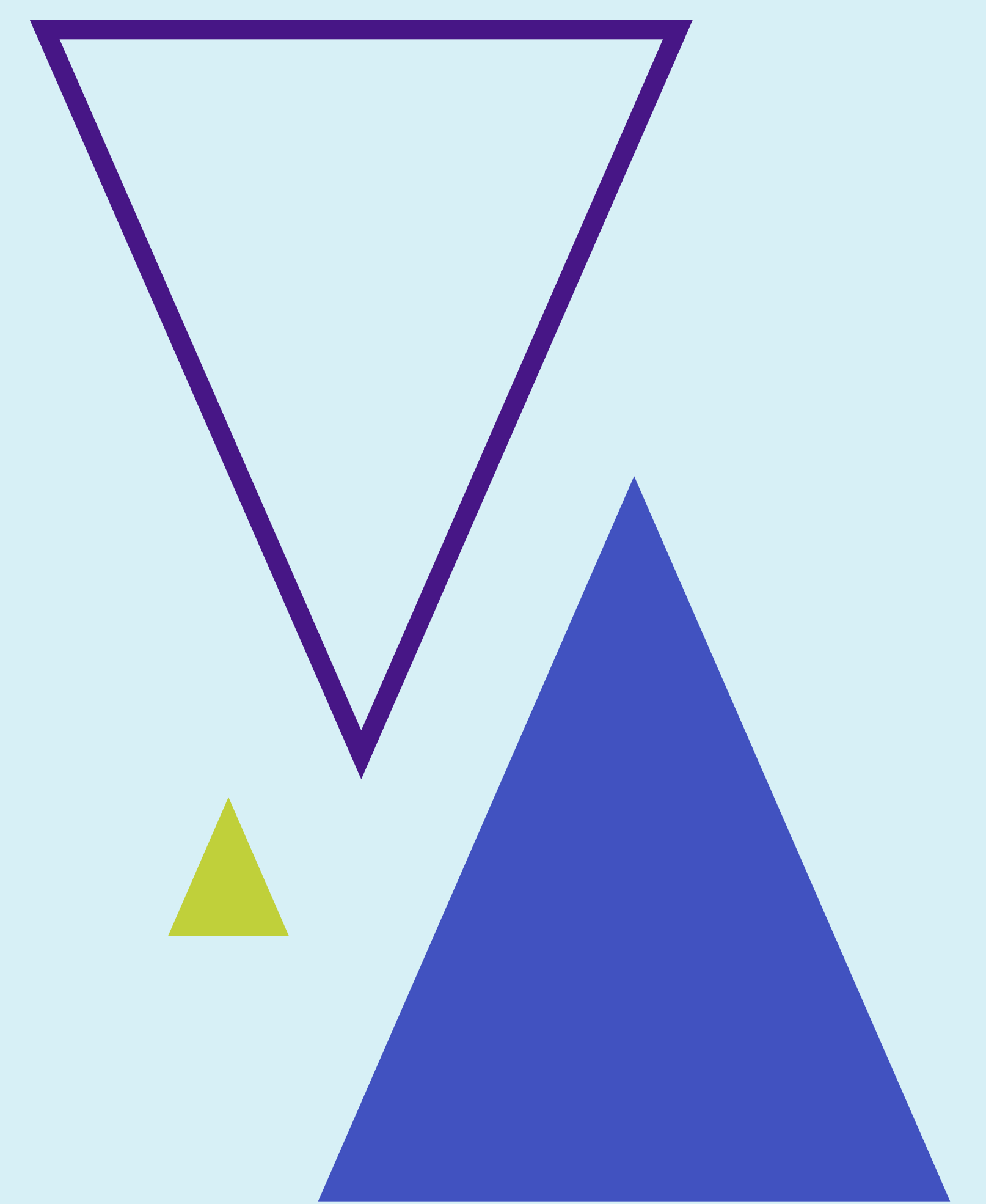


How to differentiate your institution from other colleges and universities



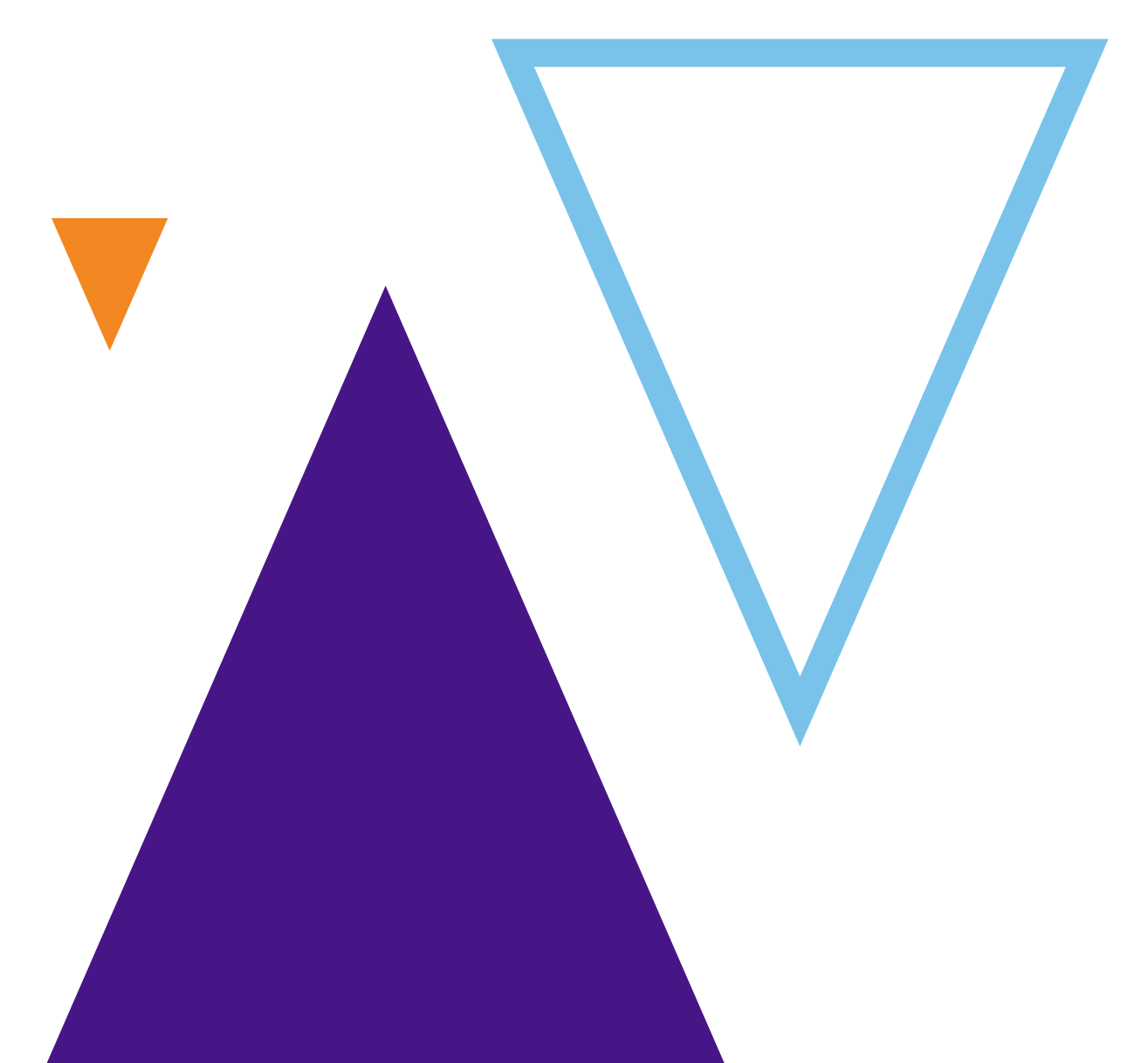
Differentiating your institution from the competition is essential for higher education. As students develop new needs and face vast opportunities, you must establish what makes your programs stand out. Uniquely positioning your college or university helps you define your specific brand and shape how individuals perceive it so you can influence potential students to choose your offerings over others in a crowded market.

Leverage your institution's greatest advantage through effective online marketing campaigns and a clear, user-friendly website. From alumni success stories to strong social opportunities, you can boost enrollment rates by highlighting what makes your institution special. Learn how to differentiate your college or university through effective marketing and evaluation strategies.

As students develop new needs and face vast opportunities, you must establish what makes your programs stand out.

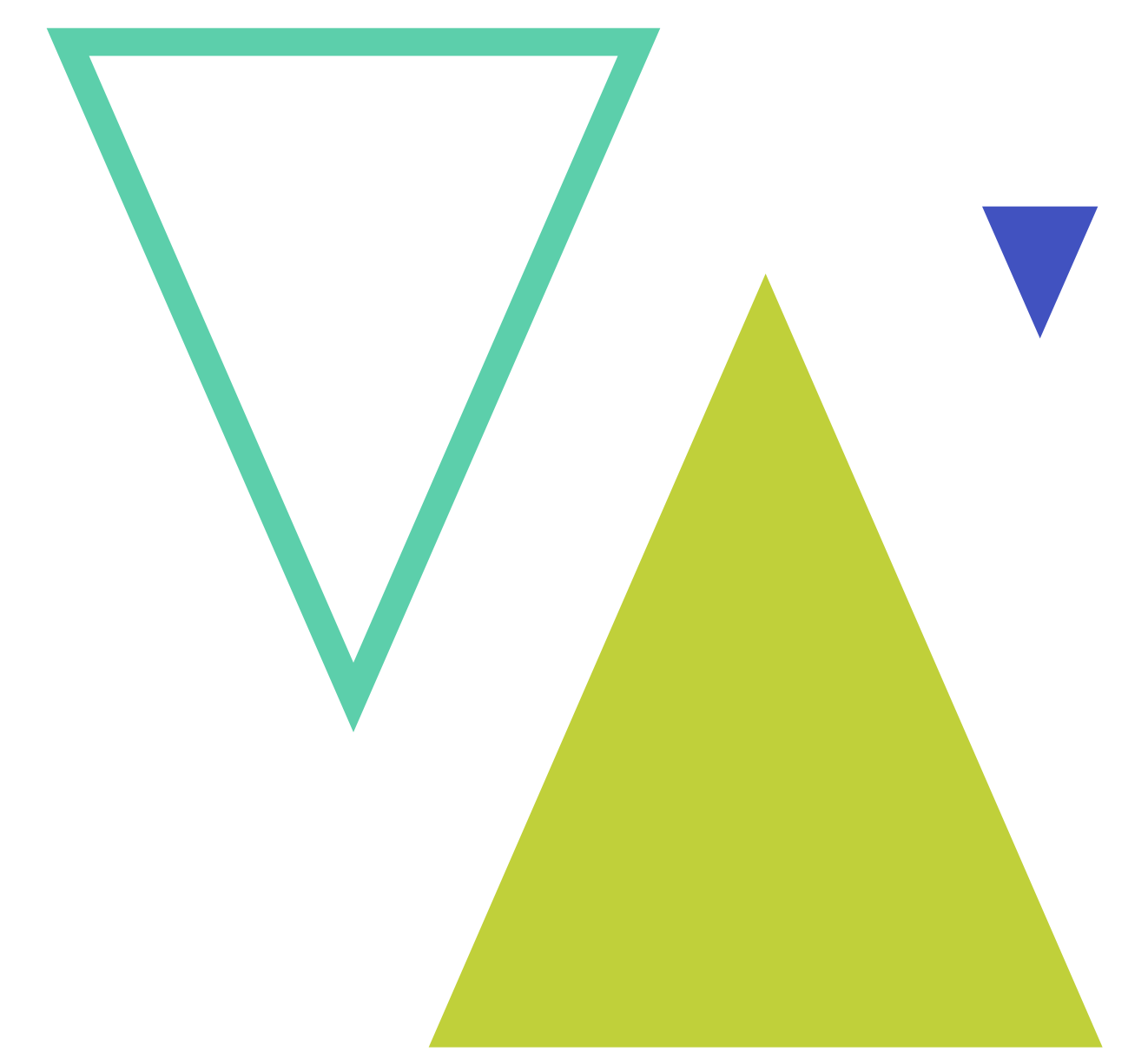
Chapter 1: Understanding the importance of differentiation in higher education

Differentiating your institution impacts its overall reputation and the perceptions of prospective students. Competition among higher education institutions is higher than ever, so you must strategically adopt digital methodologies, respond to emerging trends, and align with national initiatives to stand out. Students have more choices, unique preferences, diverse needs, economic concerns, and career readiness expectations that affect their decision-making when choosing what school to attend. Read on to learn how differentiation can benefit your institution.



Enhanced brand recognition

Differentiation increases brand recognition, helping more individuals identify and remember your institution positively.



Enhanced brand recognition benefits higher education institutions by:



Building trust and loyalty

Differentiation helps build trust with students, parents, and the community. Individuals are more likely to choose and stay at an institution when they trust its values and what it has to offer.



Attracting resources

Greater brand recognition helps institutions gather and retain resources. Faculty retention and fundraising success tend to increase when individuals trust a college or university's brand.



Creating a sense of pride and belonging

A strong brand image creates a sense of pride and belonging in stakeholders such as faculty and students.



Attractiveness to prospective students

Differentiating your institution helps attract more prospective students. Let potential applicants know what makes your institution special to motivate them to apply.

Competitive advantages

Standing out among the crowd of higher education institutions is crucial. Differentiation gives you a competitive advantage over other colleges and universities, letting prospective students know what you have to offer that the competitors lack.

Higher enrollment rates

Use differentiation strategies to boost enrollment rates and increase your revenue. Attracting more prospective students and leveraging your competitive advantages can significantly increase the number of students you enroll and retain, helping you reach your target profit margins.

Greater student success and engagement

Differentiated instruction helps students engage with learning material and reach their goals. Students in the current educational landscape have unique needs, learning styles, and schedules, and offering flexible options and instructional methods helps boost their success.

Alumni loyalty and advocacy

The more you differentiate your institution and support student success, the more loyal alumni tend to be. Alumni are more likely to donate to a college or university and advocate for its value after graduation when they benefit from its offerings.

Adaptability to market changes

The educational landscape is fluid and continuously changing. Differentiation enables you to adapt to market changes, identifying and catering to specific student needs and preferences. Continue to attract and retain students even in the midst of new learning modalities and changing career demands.

Chapter 2: Identifying your unique selling proposition (USP)

A unique selling proposition (USP)

is a brief statement that explains your institution's main benefits, values, and purpose. It lets people know what makes your institution stand out from your competitors, highlighting your greatest offering or advantage. Create an effective USP with these tips:



Determine your ideal prospective students and their needs

Understanding your institution's prospective students and their needs is crucial. Your goal is to advertise how well you can benefit students, so you want to pinpoint the precise educational objectives and emotional needs of your target audience. Do you want to attract more undergraduate or graduate students? What careers do the majority of applicants pursue? What economic backgrounds do your students come from? Survey current and prospective students to learn more about their needs, or research current trends in the age demographic you target.

Consider how well you can support student needs. For example, you might offer grants or scholarship programs that appeal to students concerned with the cost of a higher education. If students tend to be excited or nervous about being away from home, you can highlight the advantages of your institution's location. If you find that students value making friends, focus on your institution's social opportunities, such as student clubs, organizations, and events.



List the reasons your institution stands out among competing institutions

What makes your institution unique? Consider the specific advantages that place you a step above your competitors, focusing on elements such as:

- ▶ Accreditation
- ▶ Community involvement
- ▶ Graduate programs
- ▶ Class sizes
- ▶ Location
- ▶ Internship partnerships and opportunities
- ▶ Online learning options and flexible scheduling
- ▶ International programs
- ▶ Access to funding
- ▶ Specific degree programs and unique course offerings
- ▶ Specific degree programs and unique course offerings
- ▶ Long-standing history of educational excellence
- ▶ Financial support for students
- ▶ Unique teaching approaches or practices
- ▶ Past student success rates
- ▶ Top-ranked courses
- ▶ State-of-the-art facilities such as a performing arts theater or sports stadium



Prove your claims

Proving the claims in your USP enhances your reputation so prospective students are more likely to trust you. Once you establish your USP, highlight how your institution delivers this specific advantage to students. You can present reputable data about student success or gather student testimonials in various formats. Post student testimonial videos on social media or include written testimonials on your website to show prospective applicants what they can gain from your institution.

Faculty, current students, and alumni play significant roles in shaping USPs. Faculty can develop high-quality curricula, complete research in specific fields of study and deliver exceptional teaching to enhance your institution's appeal. Alumni success stories highlight how prospective students can expect to succeed through your offered degree programs. Current students can contribute to campus culture and provide feedback and insights for program improvement.



Promote your USP

Now that you have a USP and supporting proof, you can use it to promote your brand across marketing channels. Integrate the words of your USP into:

- ▶ Your website's meta description
- ▶ Banner advertising
- ▶ Promotional copy
- ▶ Brochures
- ▶ Social media pages, posts, and advertisements

Chapter 3: Leveraging academic programs and faculty expertise

Exclusive academic offerings, such as special programs and faculty expertise, are great differentiators that help attract students. You can leverage your exclusive academic offerings with these tips:

Invest in faculty development

Student success heavily relies on quality instructors. **A professor's depth of knowledge and teaching methods significantly impact how well students understand and retain course material.** Invest in ongoing faculty development to help professors enhance their educational, personal, and leadership skills. Investing in development increases faculty expertise, confirming that you are a top institution that can provide students with an outstanding education.

How to leverage exclusive academic offerings

- ✔ Invest in faculty development
- ✔ Promote faculty expertise
- ✔ Present faculty research in clear formats

Excellent faculty development activities include:

- ▶ Committee work
- ▶ Grant writing
- ▶ Peer review
- ▶ Collaboration with other higher education institutions
- ▶ Research

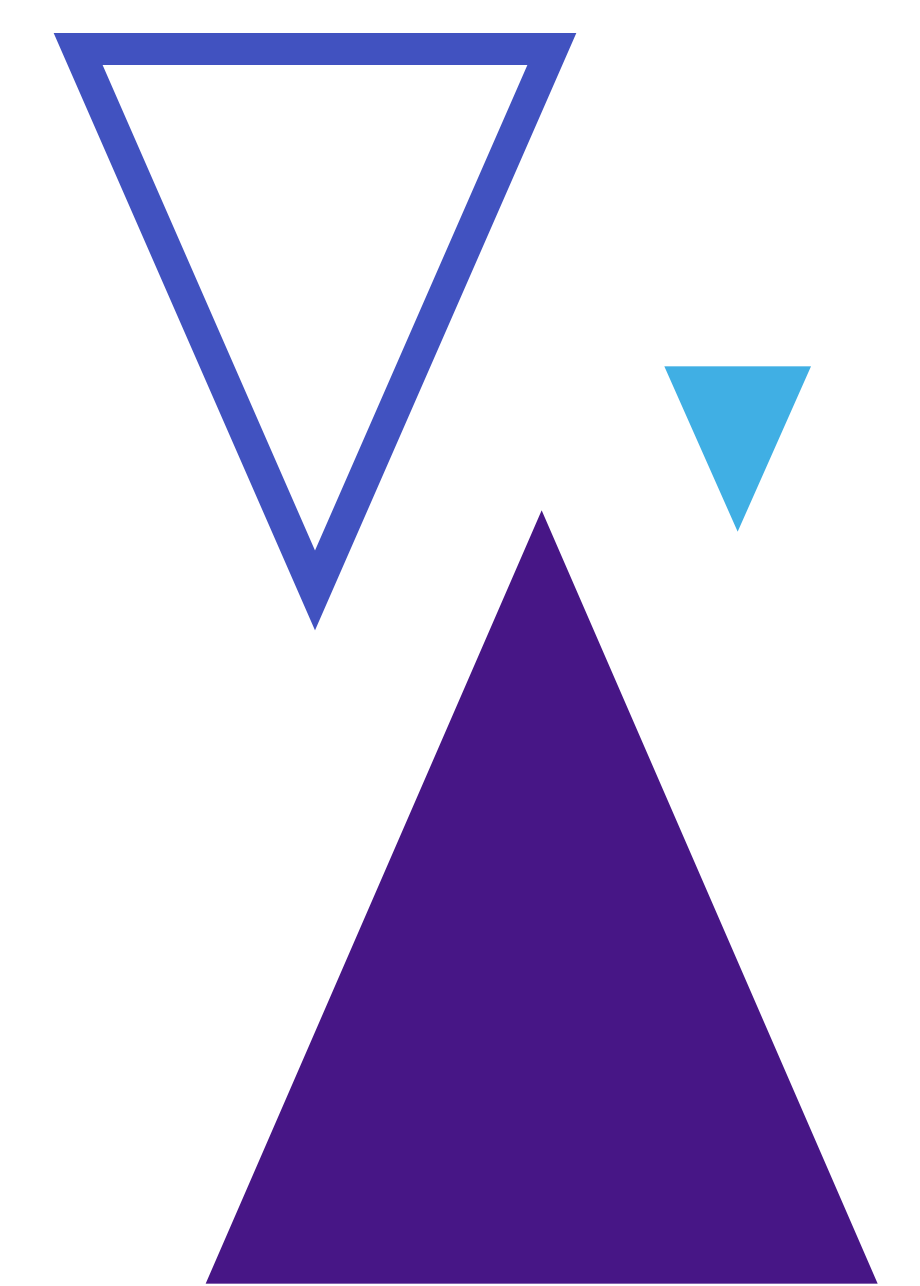


Promote faculty expertise

Promoting faculty research and expertise shows prospects that your institution stays in touch with trends and current affairs. It also reflects the brilliance of your professors, highlighting the depth of their knowledge and the quality of their teaching.

Present faculty research in clear formats

Experienced academics often develop incredible research and papers. Find ways to present their findings in simple, clear formats to generate interest in the community and potential students. Rather than presenting work in long, technical documents with academic jargon, you can turn knowledgeable findings into stories or catchy press releases. You can also present findings in educational videos or interviews. These strategies make complex topics more accessible to the general public and individuals who may consider attending your institution.



Seeing the impact your faculty has on the community or the world can inspire students to attend your institution.

Ensure faculty present their research in a way that promotes how it impacts society. Seeing the impact your faculty has on the community or the world can inspire students to attend your institution. When they see your staff making a significant impact, they strive to achieve similar success through your program.

Chapter 4: Student engagement and support

Student engagement and support are essential elements of an institution. Individuals often look at higher education as an opportunity to grow academically and socially. They want to make meaningful connections, meet new friends, and network with professionals in their desired career fields. Differentiate your institution by highlighting unique aspects of campus life such as:

Student activities

Provide opportunities for students to engage with peers and have fun. You can organize campus activities such as:

- ▶ Group fitness classes
- ▶ Professional workshops
- ▶ Volunteer opportunities
- ▶ Ice cream socials



Differentiate your institution by highlighting unique aspects of campus life such as:

- ✔ Student activities
- ✔ Campus events
- ✔ Student clubs and organizations
- ✔ Alumni engagement
- ✔ Online forums
- ✔ Non-academic support
- ✔ Extra support for students with different backgrounds

Campus events

Special campus events can also enhance student engagement. Plan or let students organize events such as:

- ▶ Concerts
- ▶ Art exhibitions
- ▶ Alternative sports events
- ▶ Comedy shows
- ▶ Festivals
- ▶ Pep rallies
- ▶ Marathons

Student clubs and organizations

Encourage students to organize or join clubs based on their unique interests. Diverse options help your institution stand out because clubs are opportunities for students to make strong connections, network, and develop extra career skills outside of the classroom. Common higher education clubs and organizations include:

- ▶ Student-run campus newspapers
- ▶ Writing clubs
- ▶ Political clubs
- ▶ Fraternities and sororities
- ▶ Theatre, film, or arts groups
- ▶ Spiritual and religious groups
- ▶ Hiking or walking groups
- ▶ Cultural groups
- ▶ Photography clubs

Alumni engagement

Alumni can serve as excellent brand ambassadors for your higher education institution. Their achievements reflect your institution's excellence, enhance its public image, and help recruit potential students. You can increase alumni engagement through:

- ▶ Lecture Series
- ▶ Alumni achievement highlights
- ▶ Class reunions or campus homecoming events
- ▶ Professional development opportunities such as networking events
- ▶ Newsletters
- ▶ Career fairs
- ▶ Alumni and student mentorship programs
- ▶ Happy hours or special dinners

Career certainty helps students choose a higher education institution and remain with it until graduation. Provide mentorship opportunities so alumni can share their success and encourage current students on their academic paths.



Online forums

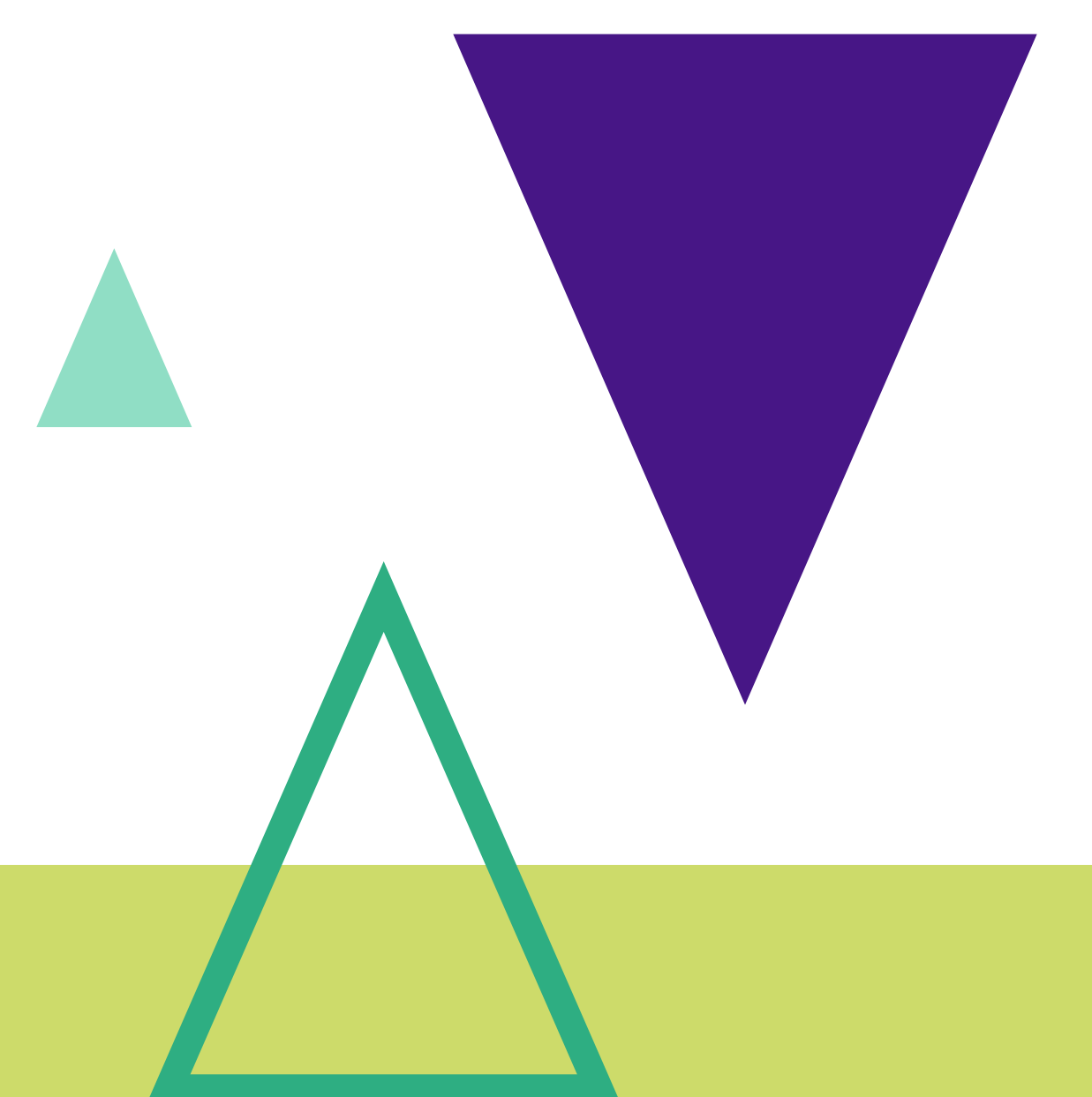
Provide online forums to help students connect outside of the classroom and in-person social settings. Some students are more comfortable connecting and sharing thoughts online. Creating and promoting an online forum gives students a place to share knowledge, discuss various topics, and continue learning outside the classroom.

Non-academic support

Support the overall well-being of students through support services such as mental health counseling and student health and wellness services. These services can help students excel academically amidst personal challenges.

Extra support for students with different backgrounds

Give all of your students a fair chance to grow and excel. Students with different cultural, ethnic, or economic backgrounds can face unique challenges, so it's important to offer extra support that caters to minority groups or those with specific barriers to success. Establish dedicated offices for students with different backgrounds, and conduct regular surveys to gauge how well your institution practices inclusivity.



Chapter 5: Marketing strategies for higher education institutions

Effective differentiation requires strategic marketing. The most helpful marketing strategies include:

Storytelling

Incorporating storytelling elements in your marketing strategies engages prospective students through narrative. You can use marketing videos or written narratives to tell the story of someone who needs to overcome a challenge and how they overcome this challenge and positively change their life at your institution. This marketing strategy focuses on your target audience and how they can reach their goals. Compelling content builds credibility and helps your institution remain in the minds of potential students when they start considering where to attend.

Another storytelling method is to implement interactive, story-based advertisements. For example, a video ad may show a student beginning their journey at your institution. Viewers can choose each step the student takes, and their decisions control how the narrative unfolds. People tend to remember stories better than they remember direct facts.



People tend to remember stories better than they remember direct facts.



Digital marketing

The fundamental elements of an effective digital marketing strategy are:

- ✔ **Compelling messaging framework:** A strong online visual identity and compelling messaging framework are essential for marketing your institution.
- ✔ **Digital channels:** Utilize multiple digital channels to ensure your target audience discovers your content. Publishing videos, photos, advertisements, and blogs on various platforms helps more people find and engage with your content. Take advantage of search engine optimization (SEO), social media pages, email marketing, and paid search campaigns.
- ✔ **Scalable website:** Your website meets various purposes, and optimizing its marketing pages is essential. Work with an experienced website designer to ensure your pages are scalable so you can easily adjust your strategy when necessary.
- ✔ **Insightful analytics:** Analytics provide data and insight into the demographics, interests, and behaviors of your target audience. Use helpful data to determine the best ways to optimize your content and reach your audience.



Content marketing

High-quality content reflects your brand. Tailoring blog posts, website content, social media posts, advertisements, and emails to your target audience helps attract more prospective students. Master SEO techniques by optimizing your keywords, images, headings, URLs, links, and user experience in your content. Meeting the unique needs of your audience is key, so you should create audience personas to fully understand who you're marketing to.



Social media marketing

Determine which social media pages your target audience uses most, and create a content calendar to ensure consistent posting. Posting consistently to the right channels helps you save time for greater efficiency. It's also important to engage with your audience by responding to messages and comments on your posts.



Personalizing the prospective student journey

Understand the steps prospective students take when choosing a higher education institution. Your content should provide what they need through each step. For example, social media advertisements may spark interest in your institution, while your website content guides students through specific offerings and helps them learn how to apply. An informative blog post might build trust in potential students before linking to a virtual campus tour, or a video might walk them through your available programs and campus life.

You should also implement targeted information, personalized messaging, and clear calls to action in your email campaigns. **Well-designed content can walk prospective students through the application or admissions process once they choose your institution as a top option.**

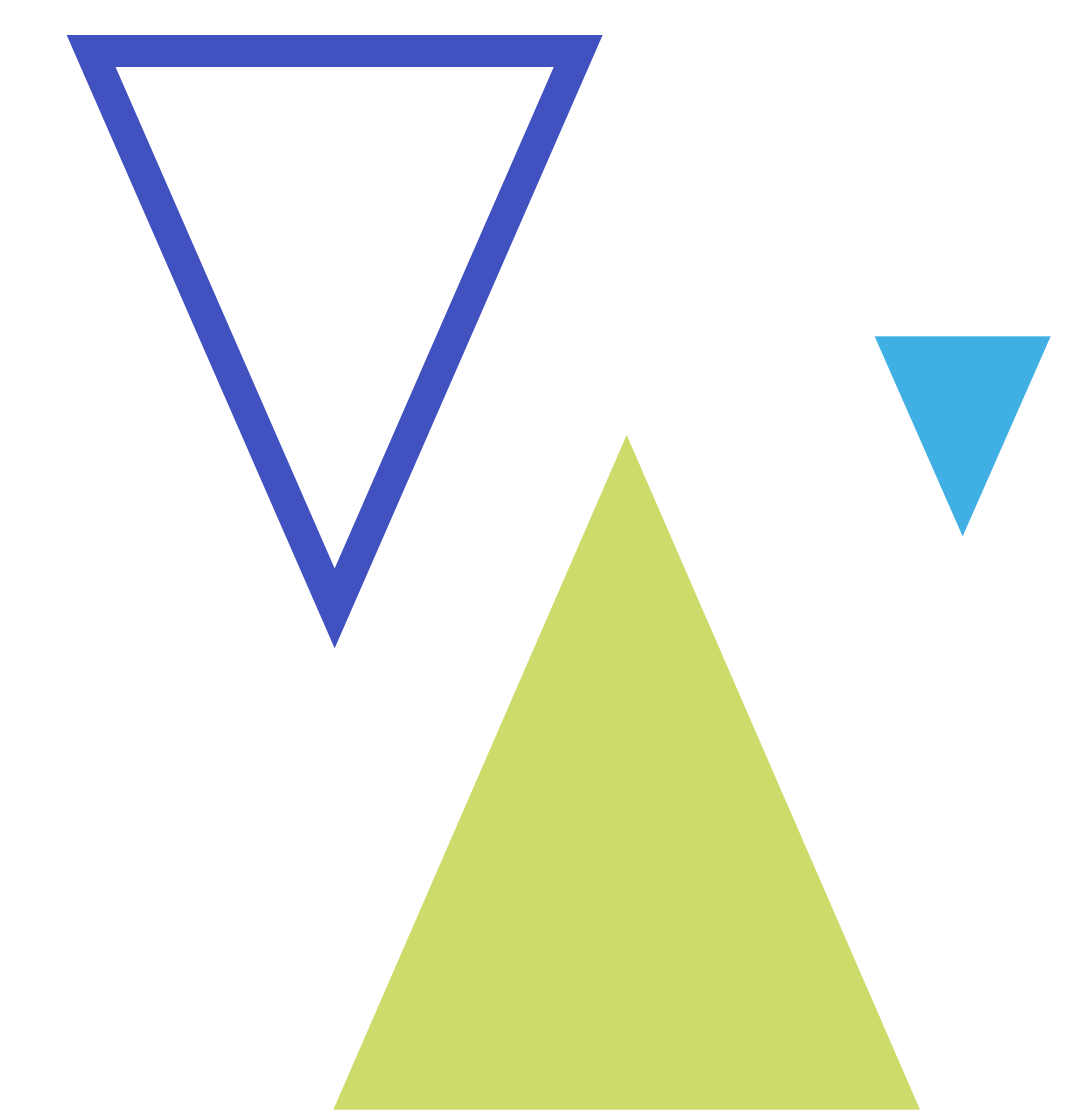
User-friendly website experience

Your institution's website should be easy to navigate and understand. Easy navigation helps prospective students find important information and engage with your content. Users are more likely to stay on your website and follow through with calls to action when they can navigate pages and links easily, so you should ensure each page provides a smooth experience.

Users are more likely to stay on your website and follow through with calls to action when they can navigate pages and links easily.

Highlighting positive career outcomes

Prospective students want to know they can attain high-paying jobs with a degree, so you must also market the overall value of higher education when you market your institution. Highlight positive career outcomes to build confidence in your target audience. Whether you post testimonials on social media or dedicate a webpage to alumni success stories, highlighting positive outcomes helps individuals trust your institution and feel that a higher education degree is beneficial.



Chapter 6: Measure the impact of your differentiation strategies

Measuring the impact of your differentiation strategies helps you adjust and scale as necessary for the greatest results. Assess your marketing efforts through key performance indicators (KPIs) such as:

Enrollment

Enrollment rates indicate how many students enroll after you start or enhance your marketing campaign. Set a measurable enrollment goal to determine if your differentiation strategies are effective or if you need to adjust them. For example, your goal may be to increase enrollment by 10 percent within a year.

Website traffic

Website traffic reveals how many users visit your website, which indicates how many individuals are interested in your institution. You can use online tools to measure how many people visit your website after engaging with your marketing content.

Click-through rate

A campaign's click-through rate is the percentage of users who engage with your content. It reveals how many people click on links within your campaign, which can help you determine which content types are most effective.



Lead generation

Lead generation is the number of leads your campaign generates. Leads may include general inquiries about your programs or the number of users who start the application process.

Conversion rates

The conversion or application completion rate indicates how many of your leads complete the application process or enroll in your program.

Cost per acquisition

Cost per acquisition helps you determine how much money you spend on your differentiation strategy compared to the revenue you gain from new students. It reveals your return on investment (ROI) so you can evaluate how efficient your marketing efforts are.

Student satisfaction

Measuring student satisfaction can help you determine how students feel about your institution and their experience with your marketing campaign and website. You can gather qualitative data through student surveys and implement continuous improvement strategies based on your findings.



Enhance your institution with advanced insights

University or college differentiation is crucial in today's saturated market. As potential students weigh many options and develop new priorities regarding education, you must make your institution stand out. Highlighting what makes your programs and offerings special helps attract more individuals and boost your enrollment rates for increased revenue.

Measuring the success of your institution and marketing initiatives is an essential part of implementing your differentiation strategy. Watermark offers data collection, measurement, and analysis software designed specifically for higher education institutions.

The Watermark Educational Impact Suite uses advanced technology to help you measure student satisfaction, evaluate the success of your courses, track faculty accomplishments, keep up with student needs, and evaluate student success. With Watermark, you can gather deep insights to inspire progress and differentiate your institution as a top choice. Request a demo to learn more about our software and how it can help you enhance your institution and optimize your differentiation strategy.